

Developing Lifelong, Profound Learning Through Continuous Improvement

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Abstract: A model of individual continuous improvement based on lifelong learning processes and practices may provide a pathway to deeper, more meaningful experiences. Such a model could offer a method for individuals to strengthen their own sense of purpose and meaning through their chosen lifelong learning processes and practices. This paper explored continuous improvement as a vehicle for profound, lifelong learning and suggested music educators as a potential population of profound learners to further explore a model of individual continuous improvement.

Keywords: Deming's System of Profound Knowledge, Profound Learning Theory, music educators

In a recent article about workforce burnout rates, the *Harvard Business Review* reported early-career employees with signs of decreased well-being and increased stress and burnout, made worse by the pandemic, causing concern for their overall well-being (Simula, 2023). In a survey of over 70 academic articles in search of what it means to be adaptable while helping employees thrive and grow in rapidly changing conditions, McKinsey & Company reported that cultivating the habits of a lifelong learner is one of the essential characteristics of strength in adaptability (Kothari et al., 2021). A model of individual continuous improvement based on cultivating lifelong learning processes and practices has the potential to provide a pathway to deeper, more meaningful experience with potential application for adult education human resource development (HRD) practitioners and scholars. Alagaraja (2023) posed the following question to emphasize the need for well-being in HRD research: *What if we studied the phenomenon of well-being that combined streams of our life and work?* This paper aimed to conceptualize a model of individual continuous improvement as a vehicle for profound learning. The paper offers suggestions for future research and proposes music educators as a potential population to further conceptualize individual continuous improvement and profound learning theory.

Literature Review

Deming's System of Profound Knowledge

The literature review included a review of Deming's System of Profound Knowledge (SoPK), Profound Learning (PL) Theory, and continuous improvement qualities and applications. Deming's System of Profound Knowledge (SoPK) is an organizational framework that is used effectively to improve organizational processes continuously (Deming, 2018). Deming described the SoPK as four interrelated components 'working together' (p. 65) to accomplish the system's goal (Deming, 2018). These four interconnected elements included 1. appreciation of a system, 2. theory of knowledge, 3. variation, and 4. psychology (Deming, 2018). Due to the interrelated components, Wong and Headrick (2021) characterized the SoPK as the intellectual underpinning of continuous quality improvement. The SoPK was described as a transformative model that provides individuals and organizations a renewed sense of motivation and joy at work (Anjard, 1995; Deming, 2018). The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle, a fundamental tool of continuous improvement measurement, could provide insight into the cyclical nature of processes and practices of continuous improvement (Baker, 2017; Deming, 2018). Adult learning processes in the workplace support workplace initiatives while supporting individual human resource development, continuous quality improvement, learning organizations, and other processes (McLean,

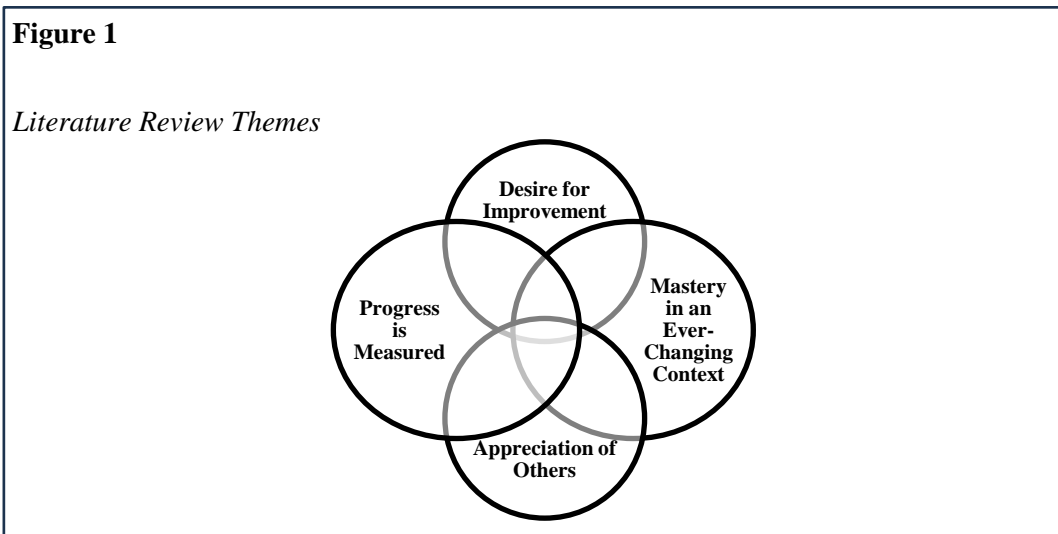
2006).

Profound Learning Theory

In a discussion of intentionality and profound learning, Kroth et al. (2022) noted, “Profound learning can occur by chance or by effort and when left to circumstance, depth of learning is unlikely to match what it would have been if deliberately pursued” (p.31). In addition, “It is in the planned, deliberate, and intentional pursuit of intentional practices that will result in deepened, lifelong learning” (p. 32). Through a conceptual model of profound learning, Kroth et al. (2022) illustrated profound learning as a process of deepening formation across the lifespan that includes intentional practices and consists of continuous processes of transformation, reformation, and deformation spanning a lifetime. The sustained nature of change and deepening formation over time is a theoretical connection point to continuous improvement as exemplified by the SoPK.

Findings

Relevant literature was reviewed to develop a conceptual model of individual continuous improvement based on the SoPK as a framework and to further conceptualize Profound Learning Theory (Daniels et al., 2023). Four themes emerged from the literature review as shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 represents the overlap between the themes, illustrating their interrelated nature and demonstrating the premise that continuous improvement is made up of various components that interact in concert to collectively improve outcomes.



Appreciation of Others

The theme of *appreciation of others* captured the transformative aspect of relationships in a continuous improvement learning context. Deming (2018) described the SoPK as a transformative model in that its principles would apply to every kind of relationship once it was understood and realized. Transformation of individuals was described as the ability to see self and others as part of a larger system connected by the quality and nature of relationships, interactions, communications, and cooperation (Deming, 2018; Hales & Chakravorty, 2006; Udod et al., 2020). Baker (2017) characterized Deming’s SoPK as improving the whole individual within important social contexts such as organizations, families, and communities. Kroth et al. (2022) noted the importance of others, such as teachers, role models, and learning communities. Wong and Headrick (2021) noted that people are fundamental to continuous improvement. An appreciation of the influence of others appeared to be an important factor in continuous improvement.

Desire for Improvement

The *desire for improvement* theme represented learner characteristics that are important for continuous

improvement. These characteristics included the importance of agency, self-efficacy, volition, and constant pursuit of improvement (Bandura, 2018; Chung, 1999; Kroth et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation and a desire for enjoyment of work may also be integral to continuous improvement. Deming (2018) noted, “One is born with a natural inclination to learn. Learning is a source of innovation. One inherits a right to enjoy his work” (p. 74). What brings joy to individuals may also foster the development of agency and the likelihood of lifelong continuous learning. Belief in one’s ability to grow and personal empowerment to improve to reach deeper, richer meaning and existence may also contribute to continuous improvement (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2018; Dweck & Yeager, 2020).

Progress is Measured

The ability to *measure progress* was another theme. Measurement was an important characteristic of continuous improvement, and one tool used to design and measure change over time was the PDSA cycle (Taylor et al., 2014). The PDSA cycle was a useful tool to measure improvements in personal practices as those practices change over time (Suarez-Barraza et al., 2013). Successive PDSA improvement cycles effectively connected prediction to learning (Wong & Headrick 2021). The PDSA cycle served as a mechanism to track changes in process outcomes over time and to measure change over time. In a qualitative research study context, measurement was defined as the change in various pursuits over time as indicators of physical status and as a marker of change over time (Charmaz, 2006).

Mastery in an Ever-Changing Context

Mastery describes the nature of continuous improvement as a mechanism occurring in an *ever-changing context*, deepening over time and contributing to a sense of increasing personal mastery over the life course. Senge (2006) characterized those with a strong sense of mastery as existing in a continuous state of lifelong growth with a clear personal vision. Growth was found to occur in a state of continuous change instead of a fixed state, allowing beliefs to adapt and change over time (Dweck, 2008). Learners who oriented themselves toward a growth mindset embraced a mastery-approach to goals in lifelong learning practices and demonstrated characteristics of personal mastery (Babenko et al., 2019; Bui et al., 2012). The nature of change within an ever-changing context and the ability of an individual to embrace this ever-changing context may be an important element in individual continuous improvement.

Conceptual Model

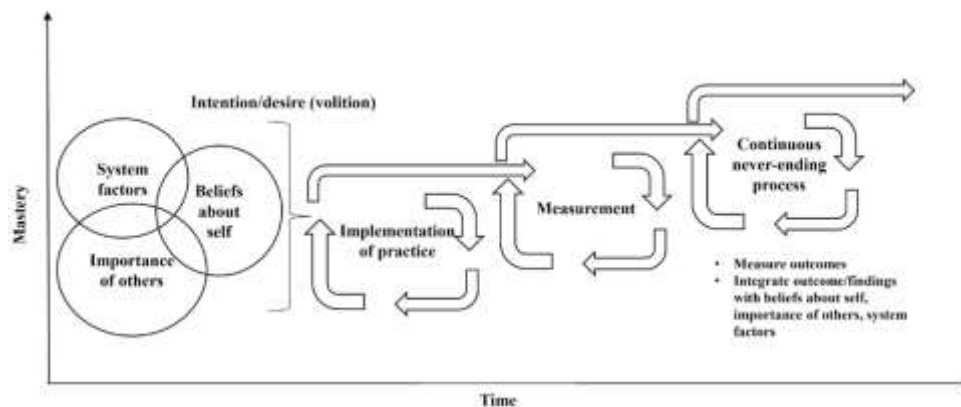
The intended outcome of the literature review was to develop a conceptual model for continuous improvement that integrates Deming’s SoPK with the PL model as a foundation for future theory building and testing. The conceptual framework was developed by integrating the themes into a continuous learning process that occurred over time in an ever-changing context. Figure 2 is the proposed model of individual continuous improvement. Mastery of a practice or process was the overarching goal of the model of individual continuous improvement. Mastery is conceptualized as a continuous, spiraling process.

Future Research

Music educators could provide an opportunity to explore profound, lifelong learning practices and processes. As lifelong learners, music educators demonstrated an interest in professional development and lifelong, continuous learning. (Hesterman, 2012). Kroth (2016) described a profound learner as “Someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time” (p. 29). Profound learners have been characterized as learners who engage in intentional processes of transformation that evolve over time (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2017). Kroth et al. (2022) noted, “By their nature, practices involve processes. Although in the larger context, we consider lifelong learning to include transformation, deformation, and reformation” (p. 34). Varner (2023) argued that general music education if approached with intentionality

Figure 2

Conceptual Model of Individual Continuous Improvement



and self-reflection, may be one of the best ways to foster a positive approach to life. As noted by Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2017), “Profound learners are intentional about seeking depth as a way of life...and [intentionality] is a never-ending deepening process available to anyone” (p. 17). Vellacott and Ballantyne (2022) noted musical practice as an under-explored research topic in adult populations. Sloboda et al. (1996) examined how practice becomes vital to human expertise as it applies to musical expertise and demonstrates, “High achievers tended to be more consistent in their practice from week to week” (p. 287).

Conclusions

Music educators as lifelong learners with deliberate and intentional and practice routines could be a potential study population to further investigate how processes and practices contribute to lifelong, profound learning.

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